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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000572

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPKO](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: SAHARANS ON AUTONOMY: PRO AND CON, BUT NO ONE'S
ASKED

Classified by CDA Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: During a week-long visit to the Western Sahara, Rabat Polcouns found many supporters of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. Many residents, however, including what a veteran observer described as a majority of the original inhabitants, were opposed - unsurprising given the near-total absence of consultation so far, a lack of confidence due to continuing repression, and continuing economic problems. Even supporters and those in the government were ignorant of any details of the GOM's intended offer. Both supporters and opposition, however, shared the same basic demands -- to run their own affairs (particularly internal) without control from Rabat. They appeared less interested in the trappings of sovereignty. Sahrawis are well familiar with the autonomy exercised by the Canary Islands and that was the most frequently cited model.

¶2. (C) The Sahara problem remains complex. Of the original Sahrawi tribes, only a minority were historically loyal to Rabat, and overall Sahrawi tribal territory stretches well into southern Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. In Western Sahara, the Spanish-era inhabitants now are a minority, but perhaps half the settlers from Morocco are themselves from Sahrawi tribes. Confidence and the continuing lack thereof remain the key challenge for the GOM. Rabat's proconsuls appear now to be emphasizing the velvet glove, and ameliorating conditions of life, although continuing repression and discrimination still constrain their ability to win hearts and minds. Genuine autonomy might, with full Sahrawi ownership, gain the favor of the population, which in turn would attract the refugees in Tindouf, but it would likely require beforehand a substantial increase in confidence and in Sahrawi participation. This is the first of two cables based on Polcouns' observations from a week-long visit to Sahara. A second message contains specific observations from key interlocutors. End Summary and Comment.

¶3. (C) Rabat Polcouns traveled for a week to the Western Sahara, March 4-9, principally in Laayoune, with one day in the traditional seat of Sahrawi culture and religion, Smara. He met Moroccan government representatives, pro-government business, tribal youth leaders and more than half a dozen members of CORCAS, along with dissidents UN and neutral expatriate observers. While the vast majority of the dozens of Sahrawis encountered were selected and usually monitored by the government, they often gave frank answers to questions about autonomy, as they had generally not been asked before. This reflected a moderating, but still repressive environment that does not appear to allow open press or public discourse on self determination, and often constrains them in private, in contrast to the relative freedom of speech that exists in

Morocco proper. Our understanding of what the Sahrawis think is also limited by the absence of opinion surveys and other data, and the limited scope given in the territory to Moroccan or international press.

Absence of Consultations

14. (C) It is clear that the Moroccans have not conducted any real consultation with the Sahrawis; political figures there indicated that they understood that the plan would be discussed in depth only after it was presented to the UN in April. Multiple members of the CORCAS insisted that they had been able to have their say during the December extraordinary sessions and that the remarks of all were conveyed to the Palace, but even supporters of the GOM and of Chairman Kalihenna did not see the "CORCAS proposal" they reportedly unanimously approved. The pro-independence community, which is not underground, has not been approached as to what issues it is concerned with. There is no shortage of diverse views on autonomy. Broader consultations would not be difficult: the local television could hold discussions, the issue could be raised in public meetings, even in the schools, if it were permitted.

Autonomy: What Do They Want? "We Only Want Self-Rule"

15. (C) Sahrawis know only the: "general outlines" of the GOM plan, but they know what they want: Genuine self rule, running their own affairs. Many were familiar with the autonomy exercised by the Spanish Canary Islands, which was the most frequently cited model. Repeatedly cited issues of

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most importance were a Sahrawi executive, a Sahrawi parliament, locally controlled police and security forces, and locally controlled judiciary. The latter points in particular stand out from Rabat's proposals. They all believed that Sahara should control its own resources. Even pro-POLISARIO activists believed that these issues were most important to them. They showed little interest in the trappings of sovereignty--foreign representation, military forces, and currency.

Absence of Confidence - Political

16. (C) Confidence remains a big problem, due to continuing repression. There was a significant reduction of visible police presence on the streets since a previous visit in October 2006. However, some of the reduction was accomplished by putting officers in plain clothes. While tension is somewhat reduced, Laayoune remains a divided city. The visit coincided with the local versions of major national celebrations for the birth of King Mohammed's daughter. There appeared to be few Sahrawis in the large crowd in the central square for a concert including traditional and hip-hop music. In general, young Sahrawis are afraid to be out at night due to fear of the police. Sahrawis are still being arrested and beaten for political offenses. According to press reports and complaints by their colleagues, Sahrawi pro-independence activists were convicted during the visit for apparently political offenses.

Absence of Confidence - Economic Discrimination

17. (C) Many Sahrawis, including some government supporters, were concerned about systematic employment discrimination. There were few Sahrawis in the government, though the government claimed a shortage of qualified personnel. Many believed that the current administration of the province is trying to do something to reduce discrimination. There was nearly universal concern about Saharan resources being exploited by northerners. Many raised the issue of income

from fisheries; employment in the hundreds of mid-scale boats in Layoune port and reportedly elsewhere in the province, along with the processing industry is almost exclusively northerners, but Sahrawis do not have much of a fishing tradition, and do not seek those jobs. (Note: Well-informed government supporters as well as critics agreed with reports Embassy has long heard that a large part of the fishing concessions are controlled by GOM security officials, specifically including Army Chief Benanni and Gendarmerie chief Benslimane. Kalihenna and Sahrawi businessmen close to him have reportedly also been rewarded with lucrative fishing licenses. End note.)

Still Strong Support for Independence

18. (C) Most meetings during the visit were arranged by the government and participants generally favored Moroccan sovereignty, but independently-arranged contacts in the human rights community were openly pro-independence. Limited anecdotal contact with Sahrawis left the impression that many remain resigned to but deeply unhappy with Moroccan rule. One credible expatriate observer who had mostly been in the territory since before the 1975 Green March asserted that 70 percent of the original inhabitants still favored independence. Among the young, nearly all are against the GOM, favoring self-determination leading to independence, he said, attributing this to the heavy-handed Moroccan occupation and the belief that Sahrawis suffer discrimination compared to Moroccans. He asserted there was considerable tension in the schools. This was confirmed by Moroccan officials, who complained that independence agitators were "targeting" students as young as 12 and had won many of them over. Those favoring independence were universally clear: the POLISARIO speaks for them, although some said that if POLISARIO leaders gave up independence they would lose their legitimacy.

A Note on Demographics

19. (C) Who is who in the Sahara and how many there are of each, remains contentious, and this came up in nearly every conversation during the visit. Although there is some data available from the 1994 Census population, and the share of

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its components from inside and outside the territory are not easy to get at. The original occupants of the Spanish territory and their descendants appear now to be in a clear minority, according to their own estimation and some neutral comments. However, perhaps as many as half the immigrants are themselves Sahrawis transplanted from Southern Morocco proper (like POLISARIO head Abdel Aziz, who is from Marrakesh). The uncertain loyalties of this group may be one reason that Morocco remains reluctant to risk a free and fair referendum on independence. Non-Sahrawi Moroccans are also there to stay, including those working in the profitable fishing industry. None of the Sahrawis consulted demanded the settlers leave, although it was believed that some would depart should subsidies be cut. Some said the non-Sahrawis should not be represented in a Parliament of the autonomous region.

110. (C) The original Sahrawi (Hassani dialect) inhabitants of the Spanish territory remain divided by affiliation to tribes: some historically loyal, some opposed to the throne in Rabat, whose traditional locales stretch well into southern Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania, which appears to be led by Hassaniya-speaking Sahrawis, who look and dress the same, many of them from some of the same tribes as their brethren in the territory. Pro-independence Sahrawis and some of the youth on the government side said that the tribal system had become almost meaningless, and, according to the activists, was being exploited by the government to divide the Sahrawis.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Bush